

*** NETANSWERS INTERNET EXTRA ***
*** Number 57: Give 'em the Finger ***

Finger is one of those Internet tools that's is, for the most part, forgotten. Most people who have joined the ranks of Net users in the last two or three years have probably never even heard of Finger -- and users who have been online longer don't have much cause these days to use this anachronism.

Finger may be all but forgotten, but it is not dead and buried. You may still see references to Finger on the Net, and occasionally -- very occasionally -- it still proves to be a useful tool.

Finger's job was to provide information about a particular user's Internet account, back when everyone accessed the Internet through multi-user computers like Unix and VAX systems. The Finger command would typically tell you the person's user name and real name, the last time he or she logged in, and whether or not the user had new e-mail. The user could also add his or her own comments, called a "plan" or "Finger file." Finger files were typically used to share contact information or clever quotes.

"Finger" was pretty darn useful, once upon a time. You could find out someone's phone number (if they chose to make it available), and find out if he was online at the moment. If so, you could fire up a "talk" session and type messages to each other.

Here's an example of what it looks like to finger someone. (This particular example is wholly invented -- it has been a long time since I had an account that was actually fingerable.)

Login name: waffle	In real life: Kevin Savetz
Office: Eureka	Home phone:
Directory: /user1/waffle	Shell: /usr/local/shells/tcsh
Last login Sun Feb 7 01:01 on tty5 from foo.bar.com	
Project: none	
Plan:	
Never apologize, never explain.	

Today, we put personal information on our Web pages and use instant messenger programs like ICQ to chat with friends who are also online. But the biggest reason that Finger has been forgotten is that most of us don't access the Net using Unix or VAX systems any longer. Our PCs and Macs don't have Finger servers built in (although you can install one, most of us have no reason to do so.)

You could also get other sorts of information via Finger: for instance, you could Finger special addresses to get a trivia question, weather report or crossword puzzle. These archaic Net treasures have all been replaced by Web sites that do the same things better.

So, there just aren't too many things left to Finger. None of the major national Internet access providers that I checked even run Finger servers: fingering them just comes up empty. Accounts at some educational institutions and smaller providers may still be fingerable.

If you want to do some fingering of your own, all you need to do is a Finger client or Web gateway. The Web gateway is the quicker method: just point your Web browser to <http://www.cs.indiana.edu/finger/gateway> -- one of several Web pages that will do your fingering for you. In the "Enter search keywords:" field, type the address of the person that you want to finger. (If you're fingering a Unix or VAX system, the address to finger is probably the same as the e-mail address.)

If -- for some unfathomable reason -- you'd like to do more serious fingering, download a Finger client. A good one for Windows is WSFinger, available from <http://www.empire.net/~jobrien/>. For the Mac, try Finger 1.5, from <http://www.stairways.com/finger/>. The Eudora e-mail client has Finger built in: you can access it from Eudora's "Ph" or "Directory Services" window.

If, for some other unfathomable reason, you're dying for more information about Finger, you can find it at <http://www.emailman.com/finger/>.

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Web-Finger gateway: <http://www.cs.indiana.edu/finger/gateway>

WSFinger for Windows: <http://www.empire.net/~jobrien/>

Finger for Macintosh: <http://www.stairways.com/finger/>

More information about Finger: <http://www.emailman.com/finger/>

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The NetAnswers Internet Extra is free to all CompuServe members. It's available in the Internet New Users Forum (GO INETNEW) in file library 11, "NetAnswers".

Got comments or ideas for future issues? We want to hear 'em. Just send a message to savetz@compuserve.com (74774,2725).

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